DOCUMENT RESUME

ED xxx xxx CS xxx xxx

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TITLE Students and Intellectual Life: An Historical Perspective.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (82nd, San Diego, CA, November 21-24, 1996).
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Colleges; Debate; *Educational History; *Educational Practices; *Extracurricular Activities; Higher Education; Intellectual Development; Public Speaking; Student College Relationship; Student Development; Student Interests; Student Motivation; *Student Organizations; *Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS Historical Background; *Literary Societies

ABSTRACT

When colleges were first organized in what would later become the United States, they were far different from those in existence today. Students matriculated, enrolled, and graduated in lock step through a prescribed 4-year curriculum. Colleges functioned not so much to encourage intellectual development as to foster moral piety. Topics and sides for student orations were assigned, including the manner of argument. Students wishing to conduct research were allowed to do so during only the 1-2 hours per week that the facility was open to them. Students developed an outlet which enabled them to engage in intellectual pursuits of their own choosing through their own methods. College literary societies provided students with an outlet for debating, public address, dramatic, literary, journalistic, and governance energies, from the founding of Harvard's Spy Club in 1719 through the end of the 19th century (though their heyday was 1800-1875). Societies also provided a healthy competitive rivalry on campus, spurring members to greater effort than many displayed toward curricular pursuits. Important contributions of literary societies include curricular reform, especially in the area of debate and public address, student publications and student government, service-oriented circulating libraries, and intercollegiate debate and forensic programs. The popularity of literary societies shows that students will sometimes put forth an amazing effort to learn what they consider to be relevant. (Contains 19 references.) (CR)

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ED 408 622

Students and Intellectual Life: an Historical Perspective

by

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presented at the annual meeting of the

Speech Communication Association
November, 1996

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Students and Intellectual Life:
an Historical Perspective

When colleges were first organized in what would later become the United States, they were far different from those in existence today. Students matriculated, enrolled, and graduated in lock step through a prescribed four-year curriculum. Coursework assignments generally were completed in Latin, though Greek and Hebrew were also popular. Colleges functioned not so much to encourage intellectual development, as to foster moral piety. While oral assignments were generally part of the curriculum (as Rhetoric is central to the Liberal Arts), such assignments bore little resemblance to those in practice today. Topics for student orations were assigned; when students were engaged in argument through disputations, the topics, the manner of argument (Aristotelian syllogism) and the sides were assigned (Thomas, 1943). Any student wishing to conduct research might do so in the college library, with permission, during the one or two hours a week the facility was open to him (Roach, 1950).

It should come as no surprise that students found such an atmosphere stultifying. In response to constraints modern students would find laughable, colonial college students developed an outlet which enabled them to engage in intellectual pursuits of their own choosing through their own methods.

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The earliest manifestation of such outlets was the college literary society (Rudolph, 1968). Frederick Rudolph (1968) considers the literary society "the first effective agency of intellect to make itself felt in the American college...." (p. 137). Literary societies evolved over time into debating societies and intercollegiate forensics programs (among other things.) Understanding what those societies provided for their students and what lengths students went to in order to assure the existence of those societies may help today's forensics educators understand what motivates students to participate in the programs they direct.

Functions of Literary Societies

College literary societies fulfilled four major functions. Most were originally constituted to provide open discussion, debate, or other oral presentations on issues of interest to members; this function necessitated library collection and circulation of print material to prepare for these oral exercises; some of their research or creative efforts merited publication, for which the societies also provided an outlet; perhaps most important, they represented a social bonding agent (Greenstreet, 1989). This paper considers each function, as each represents an opportunity for contemporary forensics programs to learn the lessons of the past.

oral exercises

The primary formalized objective of most of these societies was to discuss issues of concern to the members. A typical literary society constitution required each meeting to include at least one disputation (Potter, 1944, 1963). The focal point of most planned meetings was a debate (Harding, 1971). These literary society debates bore no similarity to the disputations of the formal curriculum. Literary society debates were conducted in English, and disputants were not restricted to formal syllogistic reasoning. Although reliance on evidence appears to have been a central concern (as is suggested by the development of society libraries), literary society debates were likely to involve use of humor, ad hominem argument, emotional appeal, and a range of other persuasive elements prohibited in the formal curriculum (Nichols, 1936a; Engle,1983). *Today's educators might note that historically, engaging other students in oral argument has always been attractive to some students.*

Literary society debates also varied from curricular disputations in terms of the amount of preparation which was allowed. While debaters might be allowed as much as three weeks to prepare on a significant and serious issue, societies might also simply announce a less demanding topic and debate it impromptu. It was not unusual for members to be allowed a

week to prepare position statements and plan strategy (Nichols, 1936a; Engle, 1983, Roach, 1950; Potter, 1944). Society debates were less formal, more fun, and more spontaneous than formal curricular disputations.

Literary society debates also differed in other significant ways from required curricular disputations. Members of a literary society might expect to freely select the side of the question they wished to support (Roach, 1950; Potter, 1963). Topics were not dictated by the faculty, but chosen by the societies. Society debate topics appear to have mirrored the concerns of their members. Through the mid-17th century, topics were primarily concerned with theological matters, but gradually secular subjects emerged and then dominated (Harding, 1971; Potter, 1963, pp. 18-19.) Concerns pressing the nation were often reflected in literary society debates During the period 1820-1840, for instance, slavery was a frequent source of debate in all regions of the country (Harding, 1971.) Other often-mentioned topics include suffrage, Mormonism, Napoleon, and the independence of Latin America's emerging nations (Monroe Doctrine) (Harding, 1971, pp. 336-537.) Some topics were more frivolous; these all-male societies were not above discussing women in a manner which would have met with faculty approval (Harding, 1971; Potter, 1944). *Contemporary forensics educators might note that restrictive rules within the classical curriculum pushed students into the more open*

forum of the literary society., which encouraged student creativity in exploring concerns students found important.

Society members who were not preparing to debate were expected to prepare orations or readings on subjects of their own choosing (Harding, 1971; Roach, 1950). Typically, all members were expected to have something to share or do at each meeting. Like debates, society orations were less restricted than those required in the formal curriculum. Members could choose their own subjects, and could approach them in any manner they found suitable, speaking to enlighten, to inspire, to motivate, or simply to entertain (Roach, 1950; Thomas, 1943). While members had fun with these speeches, most members also spent quite a bit of time on them (Emerson, 1931; Roach, 1950, pp. 55-58). Literary readings at meetings were rather freely structured and allowed for modest dramatic productions of a sort (Emerson, 1931; Harding, 1971). *Here too educators might consider the societies' openness to diverse styles and forms of expression, their belief in the value of all means of discourse and performance.*

Literary societies recognized that implicit in any form of public address is criticism. Members were expected to provide constructive criticism of each others' efforts (Thomas, 1943, p. 200). These students were apparently perceptive in detecting subterfuge. George T. Strong, a member of Columbia's

Philolexian Society, wrote in 1836 "Rogers spoke for the first time tonight, or rather it was the first time I had heard. His speech was very handsome—very well done but not an argument in it." (Roach, 1950, p. 57). Members also demonstrated commitment to and enthusiasm for tasks which prepared them to become better critics (and presenters). John H. Raymond, later president of Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and first president of Vassar testifies:

It was my constant habit while in college to spend a part of the day several times a week in the civil and commercial courts studying the style of debate and delivery in vogue among young lawyers. For a similar purpose, I frequented the theatre, and became a sort of connoisseur in theatrical criticism. Shakespeare I studied with laborious assiduity and genuine relish, and this I have never regretted. Such was the effect of my efforts that I overcame in great measure a natural bashfulness which I had supposed would always unfit me for public speaking, and my mind was entirely diverted from the study of medicine which had been my first choice for a profession, and set on that of law. (Roach, 1950, p. 69).

Raymond was a member of the Peithologian Society at Columbia in the late 1820's (Roach, 1950, pp. 68-69). *As the above experiences indicate, members of literary societies were motivated to learn because they saw immediate use for*

what they were learning. Their motivation came from the highly pragmatic value of the experience, not from grades or semester hours.

While oral activities were the primary rationale which brought the literary societies into being, debates, speeches and readings were by no means the only activities in which such societies engaged. Public debates and demonstrations of oral presentational skill may have been the most visible elements of the literary societies, but there were other equally valuable contributions to higher education.

libraries

In order to discuss, review, present, or critique intelligently, literary society members needed access to ideas. Such access was unlikely to come through their colleges for two reasons: (1) the library was viewed as a priceless collection for the use of college faculty, and (2) curricula excluded study in contemporary fiction, drama, political science, and contemporary social issues. In response to these shortcomings, literary societies established their own libraries. Society libraries were typically housed in a room the college set aside for society use, and a member of the society usually supervised acquisition and circulation of materials (Harding, 1971). Today, these libraries are recognized for the quality as well as the size of their collections (Harding,

1971; Roach, 1950). Catherine Storie points out

> As the whole class of fiction was not considered of a serious enough nature to merit a place in the college library, the students' literary society library collections preserved a type of rare book not usually found elsewhere. (Roach, 1950, p. 66).

Prior to the Civil War it was not unusual for literary society libraries to contain more volumes than the college library (Engle, 1983, p. 38; Harding, 1971; Roach, 1950; Rudolph, 1968, p. 143). Faculty reportedly joined these organizations in order to access society library collections (Engle, 1983, p. 38). These libraries were designed to circulate, not to warehouse information (Rudolph, 1968, p. 143). *Contemporary coaches who worry their students will not conduct research in the university or public library might note that students who want to find information will go to great lengths to locate it.*

publications

In addition to oral exercises, literary societies encouraged members to express their thoughts, emotions, and imaginings in writing. Weekly society meetings would usually include reading of papers by members, as well as the reading of the society "scandal sheet" or newspaper (Emerson, 1931, p. 364). Societies routinely collected the writings of their members into literary

magazines (Rudolph, 1968, p. 142). While some of the essays focused beyond the college, others were directed toward the behavior of the members themselves (Roach, 1950, pp. 62-64). *In addition to noting once again that students will put forth amazing effort in pursuit of a goal in which they are interested, contemporary educators might also consider the role of recognition (seeing one's name and/or effort in print) in enhancing student commitment.*

social bonding

As might be expected, conducting orderly business meetings of a group of verbally skilled, orally inclined, informed, and concerned undergraduates was no easy task. Business meetings were generally conducted with strict adherence to Roberts' Rules of Order (Emerson, 1931, p. 364; Roach, 1950, pp. 66-67). Bowman says "Nowhere else in the colleges was there occasion for such vigorous parliamentary practice as in the business sessions of the societies." (p. 77). Describing a typical meeting of the society to which he belonged, Emerson (1931) recalls

There was much give and take. Motions of all sorts were proposed. These were amended and speeches would be made upon them. Members would rise to points of order. The chair would rule. The ruling would be appealed from

[sic]. It was great fun, it was great training in parliamentary usage, and it was splendid exercise in rough and tumble speaking. (p. 364).

While parliamentary procedure helped provide for the uninitiated an illusion that meetings would indeed be orderly, Roach (1950) confirms Emerson's image of barely controlled chaos (p. 67). A likely explanation is that students were having fun while making serious points about the business of their organizations. *As they struggle for control in squad meetings or marvel at the boisterous nature of discussion in the van on the way back to the motel, today's faculty might take some small comfort in the notion that their students--at least in terms of decorum--are not so different from their forebears in this regard.*

It is not likely students would go to this much trouble unless they valued the experience of membership. Society membership proved attractive to James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Woodrow Wilson, Daniel Webster, Rufus Choate, Albert Beveridge, and William Jennings Bryan (Potter, 1963, p. 20; Roach, 1950). No fewer than nine Presidents and five Vice Presidents of the United States joined literary societies as undergraduates (Harding, 1971).

Many members found the literary society provided their most meaningful college experiences. James B. Angell, later president of the

University of Michigan, wrote of his undergraduate experience at Brown (1845-49) "I have heard many an old graduate say that he regarded the benefit derived from the society to which he belonged as equal in value to the help secured in the classroom." (Roach, 1950, pp. 69-70). John H. Raymond testifies what the literary society meant to him.

My chosen arena was the literary society to which I belonged. Here I laid out all the strength I possessed, and here I obtained all my college honors. The silver medal "for excellence in oratory" which at the close of my sophomore year I took away from a number of honorable competitors (several of them belonging to higher classes) particularly pleased me, and next to this; my repeated elections to the editorial chair of *The Academic* , our society paper. (Roach, 1950, p. 69).

Emerson (1931) contends Raymond was not alone in finding himself through the college literary society.

In spite of all our idealizing about the motives which brought students to college in former times, I believe it is a fact that much of the popularity of the old literary society grew out of the desire for social prestige and the social urge. It afforded for the student that peculiarly attractive opportunity for social mingling which goes with a sort of exclusiveness founded upon merit, it brought him in a special and wholly satisfying way in contact with selected

kindred spirits; and, in those days, it gave him a definite position in the college community. It was something for him to *belong* to, to identify himself with, or, what was more important, to *be* identified with by his fellows. Apparently women found similar attraction in such associations, for they formed their own societies when they entered higher education (Solomon, 1985, p. 105). Most societies were segregated by sex; though Oberlin initiated coeducational literary societies, only Boston University seems to have followed (Harding, 1971; Solomon, 1985).

Contemporary scholars might note what students found in these organizations: literary societies provided fellowship, a sense of belonging, and a sense of achievement to their members. Societies also provided intellectual and artistic challenges at once more relevant and more difficult than those offered by the formal curriculum. Literary societies established and maintained independent publications and libraries. Potter (1944) summarizes the nature of these societies nicely

Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the record books indicate that the major literary and debating societies were functioning with unabated vigor, conducting strenuous parliamentary business sessions, assigning and criticizing compositions, orations, and debates, competing with one another for members and academic honors, amassing large libraries, holding public

exhibitions, jealously clinging to their independence from faculty interference, and, in general, behaving like [sic] little republics. (pp. 70-71).

Impact of the Societies

The contributions of literary societies to American higher education include broadening of the classical curriculum, especially in areas such as public address; the roots of the service library, with a freely circulated uncensored collection available to the entire college community; the beginnings and development of student publications; the roots of student government and student governance over student concerns; commencement ceremonies; and intercollegiate debate and forensics programs (Baker, 1899, p. 365; Murphy, 1988, p. 47; Nichols, 1936b; Rieke & Sillars, 1975). In many ways, functions wholly within the formal framework and aegis of the modern university are extensions of the activities of the literary societies.

Student literary societies also initiated (through practice) the critical concept of academic freedom. Harding (1971) feels:

Perhaps the greatest service which the literary societies rendered for their members and for higher education in general was their contribution to academic freedom. Despite the paternal despotism of the faculty, the societies seem to have enjoyed a vast latitude in the selection and discussion of their

debate questions. (p. 319). Society members conducted debates— both strenuous and frivolous—an topics of their own choosing, before public audiences and behind closed doors, for about 150 years, generally without noticeable ill effects. *Contemporary educators should recognize that bright, articulate, motivated students can and do improve the quality of life in academe and in their society through the pursuit of that which interests them.*

Contemporary educators should take two more essential concepts of an enduring nature from even a passing acquaintance with the literary societies. The first, unquestionably, is that the life of a college student extends well beyond the classroom. That the extracurriculum plays an important, sometimes a dominant role in the education of undergraduates appears so obvious as to be inescapable. *The lesson for contemporary forensics educators here is to add to that rule the corollary that the extracurriculum increases in importance in inverse ratio to the relevance of the curriculum.* The experience of the college literary societies suggests the more relevant the curriculum, the less dominant the extracurriculum. When the forensics program is a direct outgrowth of the speech communication curriculum, it may prove difficult to attract students who are not interested in studying that curriculum. Students interested in the free-flowing interchange of ideas may

feel constrained by the classroom milieu and the presence of faculty.

The second concept is also fundamental, but it is often overlooked by educators. It is simply that students want to learn, that undergraduates will put forth considerable effort and expend considerable scarce resources (time, energy, and money) to provide an education they feel is useful and relevant. The reason students were willing to expend so much effort in preparing to debate, in drafting orations and essays, in organizing skits and literary presentations, in editing and publishing magazines and newspapers, in developing and maintaining libraries--all entirely outside their curricular assignments--is that their reward was worth the effort. The benefits outweighed the costs, in their eyes. While the motivation of the stick, provided by the faculty in punishments, often failed, the literary societies succeeded because they provided the carrot: relevant, useful accomplishment.

Summary

College literary societies provided students with what they could not find in the formal college curriculum. From the founding of Harvard's Spy Club in 1719 through the end of the nineteenth century (though their heyday is generally c.1800-c.1875) literary societies provided students with an outlet for debating, public address, dramatic, literary, journalist, and governance energies. Societies also provided (in most cases) a healthy competitive rivalry

on campus, a competition which spurred members to greater effort than many displayed toward curricular pursuits. These societies amassed significant library collections which they circulated among their members. At any given time, perhaps as many as half the undergraduates enrolled at a particular institution would belong to a literary society. Though these societies were completely under the control of students, many were in fact initiated by college presidents or faculty. The administration usually encouraged membership, and usually also provided a room dedicated to the use of the society (where the society library was housed). The societies fulfilled an important social need for the undergraduate: they provided the student a place she or he belonged.

The history of the literary societies is very nearly a Greek tragedy in the sense that their great strengths caused their downfall. Literary societies simply proved too relevant, and their activities were absorbed into the formal curriculum or into the formalized extracurriculum as student body governments began to collect and disburse student activity fees. One of the major recruiting devices, the rivalry with another campus literary society, also proved a tragic flaw on some campuses.

Important contributions of the literary societies include curricular reform, especially in the area of debate and public address, student

publications and student government, service-oriented circulating libraries, and intercollegiate debate and forensics programs. Perhaps the most important lessons to be learned from a study of literary societies are (1) the importance of the extracurriculum in the life of the undergraduate is inversely proportional to the relevance of the curriculum, and (2) students will put forth sometimes amazing effort to learn what they consider relevant.

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